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SUBJECT: KARZAI CONSIDERS LEVEL PLAYING FIELD OPTIONS

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Classified By: CDA Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) President Karzai told the Charge on April 9 that he had already begun enacting measures to create a level playing field for all presidential candidates in this summer's election. He would provide us a decree prohibiting involvement by security forces in electoral activities, pointing to a document on his desk awaiting his signature to be issued by Saturday. The Charge asked Karzai to promulgate the media law and enact other measures that would demonstrate to the political opposition, civil society, and international community a real accomplishment toward a free, fair, and transparent election.

¶2. (C) Karzai said he had already instructed the Ministries of Interior and Defense to follow the decree's guidelines. Following up on an earlier exchange between Karzai and SRAP Holbrooke, Charge presented Karzai copies of the Hatch Act and other USG regulations on restricting USG employees' engagement in political campaigns in their official capacities. Karzai eagerly received the documents, noting that he had previously only been aware of India's campaign regulations. Karzai thought that since the US and Afghanistan shared a presidential system, US laws might be a better fit for the country than India's.

¶3. (C) Karzai said he was waiting for Supreme Court Chief Justice Azimi to weigh in on constitutional questions concerning the media law before publishing the law in the official legal gazette (reftel). Karzai promised to move the law forward if Azimi clears the way. Karzai also expressed interest in enacting stricter campaign finance legislation, decrying his opponents' use of foreign funds for their campaigns. He singled out possible candidate Ahmed Ali Jalali's ability to open enormous campaign offices in Kabul and elsewhere. "I can't launch my campaign, because I'm broke," Karzai said. Karzai welcomed the Charge's offer to send copies of US campaign finance legislation to the Palace.

¶4. (C) Karzai revealed that he had recently met with United Front leader Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani to discuss support for Karzai's re-election in return for consideration of moving Afghanistan from a presidential system to a parliamentary system. Karzai did not say whether Rabbani was speaking on behalf of the UF or on his own, but said he would meet again with Rabbani on Sunday (other UF leaders have told us they expect to endorse former Foreign Minister Abdullah, but Rabbani has shown some distance from that process). Karzai thought there could be benefits to a parliamentary system in the abstract, but was convinced that the current presidential system was the best fit for Afghanistan, for now. "A parliamentary system requires strong institutions, and we don't have them," he said. "It would mean disaster for us and a Great Game for our neighbors."

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